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A Soviet Fear Campaign

Multiple firings of six unarmed Soviet missiles believed to be intermediate-range SS20s stunned U.S. intelligence early last month, heightening concern that massive Soviet naval exercises in the North Atlantic were designed to intimidate the West.

Officials here differ whether the United States was notified about the first-ever launchings. But there is universal agreement about these aspects of the SS20 surprise and the naval games: both were unprecedented in size and scope; both fit new Soviet fear tactics aimed at Western Europe.

That portends a summer and fall of extraordinary Soviet maneuvers. The Russians want to regain the initiative lost last December when NATO installed its new Pershing II missiles. They also want to undermine President Reagan as leader of the West and defeat his reelection bid. That he seems benignly indifferent may be less a sign of a president's strength than of a candidate's folly.

Multiple firings of unarmed SS20s violate no Soviet treaty undertaking. But the sudden discovery that the missiles were on their way north from launching sites, believed west of the Urals, came as a shock.

That shock equaled the tremor that surged through the Pentagon when the Defense Intelligence Agency learned that Delta-class Soviet strategic submarines—armed with nuclear-tipped strategic ballistic missiles—had sailed with the fleet into the open Atlantic. "It was a surge of Deltas, the first ever," one high-level official told us.

This, too, happened in early April. The Deltas have occasionally sailed far from home, but never before have they left their base near Murmansk on the Kola Peninsula in "a surge" to join fleet maneuvers in the open ocean.

Top strategists in the Reagan administration seldom agree on all points, but there is strong consensus that, as one top official told us, the Kremlin has made a decision to "turn up the fear factor to the max." That implies an ominous shift in Soviet policy toward the United States and its sometimes reluctant European allies: instead of under-

playing its military power, which failed to stop NATO rearmament, it is trying to terrorize by muscle-flexing.

The shift from Slavic caution to Great Russian chauvinism seems connected with the Kremlin's power vacuum. That vacuum was not filled by the elevation of Konstantin Chernenko, Leonid Brezhnev's aging crony who had been ignominiously passed over when Brezhnev died.

The soundness of Kremlinologist doubts that Chernenko ever would exert real power was confirmed when the Central Intelligence Agency finished an in-depth study of Chernenko's health. It found him seriously disabled by an emphysema-like lung disease, compounded by circulatory problems.

That opened the door of real power for the hardest of Kremlin hard-liners, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, and his collaborator, Defense Minister Dmitri Ustinov, who are now calling all turns of Soviet foreign policy.

The result has heightened the Soviet military posture worldwide. In Central Asia, an awesome aggregation of Soviet bombers assembled, partly for action in Afghanistan. Naval maneuvers along the Vietnam coast signaled China not to cozy up too close to Reagan. It worked. Reagan's speeches were censored, and Chinese military men were excluded from meetings and festivities during his visit.

Not so clear is how Soviet intimidation affects U.S. allies in Europe, but signals are troublesome. During Italian Foreign Minister Giulio Andreotti's visit in Moscow with Chernenko, he was warned point-blank by Gromyko not to forget that the Soviet Union could create "a Pompeii" out of all Italy. Days later, Italian Prime Minister Bettino Craxi suggested a possible moratorium in the NATO nuclear buildup.

Desiring to shed all bellicosity and appear a man of peace in seeking reelection, Reagan may be making a mistake by ignoring the Kremlin's shift. Asked at his last press conference about the Soviet naval exercise, he made light of it as "nothing more" than the usual springtime war games.

More than most, President Reagan should know his remark was nonsense. Treating voters as too delicate to know the truth could be downright dangerous by inadvertently helping the Gromyko-Ustinov campaign to overawe the West.

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